

No Greater Joy

3 John 1-8

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The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. ² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³ For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. ⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. 3 John 1-8 (ESV)

Introduction

I am well into my fifth month of service as your Pastor for the Next Generations and this is my first opportunity to publically and personally give thanks to God for you and for entrusting me with this responsibility. You have welcomed and embraced Sally and me and our daughter Kristi with wide open arms, you have lavished us with extravagant grace and more kindness than we deserve, and you have commissioned me to spend my time and energy doing what I love pursuing a vision for the next generation—a vision that has gripped my life and shaped my ministry and defined my passions for more than three decades.

My aim this morning to share a portion of this vision, and in so doing I hope will add a little kindling to the fire of your passion to pursue a vision for the next generations—A vision that I believe this church has.

Pastor Mark set me up beautifully last week so that I am able to pick up where he left off in his message from Romans 7.

Remember at the end of his message he gave us an illustration of what the Christian life is all about as defined by Romans 7. The image was a long down escalator...clicking its way downward to destruction. A long escalator crowded with the masses being carried away by gravitational pull of the culture, blissfully unaware or unconcerned about the everlasting torment that awaits them.

There is no up escalator for the Christian. We cannot coast our way into joy. The call of the Christian life is to pick up our cross and passionately follow Jesus up the down escalator. The call of the Christian life is to step onto that down escalator, and start climbing against the gravitational pull of the world and its system and against the gravitational pull of our own sinful flesh, and follow Jesus who for joy that was set before him, bore the shame and all the gravitational forces against him. The Christian life is following Jesus up the down escalator, "*pressing on toward the goal*" (Philippians 4:14) for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

As Pastor Mark was sharing this image I was saying to myself—"*YES! That's the vision of the Christian life and that's our vision for the next generation*"

Our vision is that by the grace of God the blinded eyes of our children would be opened to the destruction at the bottom of the escalator and to the glory and the joy at the top.

That by the grace of God they would turn, and fix their eyes on the beauty of the One who goes before them.

And as they go, they would be well-equipped to walk in that way and to effectively and winsomely engage those going in the opposite direction with the gospel, for the sake of Christ.

That they would be saturated with the Word of God and with the sword of the Spirit in their hand they would fight the fight of faith all the way to the top, enduring all the dangers, toils and snares, and persevering, faithful to the end where they will meet their Savior and look into his radiant face as his voice resounds “well done, good, faithful, persevering servant—enter into the JOY of your master”.

Our vision for the next generation is a vision for their joy in Christ in this life and in the life to come, forever and ever.

If you are going with us up the down escalator, I know this vision is in your heart and before we're done this morning, I hope that vision is stirred up and closer to the surface of our corporate consciousness.

I'd like to turn to our passage from 3 John 1-8 and focus our attention this morning on verse 4 where John makes this amazing statement—“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (3 John 4) I want us as a church and I want each of us individually to know and experience that joy.

First let's consider the situation that prompted that amazing claim:

The apostle John is an old man now, probably in his 80s and writing to Gaius who he knew and loved like a son. John's aim in this brief letter is to address a problem caused by Diotrophes, one of the leaders in the church who not only refused to welcome some traveling missionaries who were commended by John, but was also expelling people from the church who showed hospitality to them. As unhappy as John was about Diotrophes's behavior, he was very glad to hear that Gaius, by contrast was being faithful. He had welcomed these men who were strangers to him as brothers in the Lord and extended hospitality and care to them. When these men returned and told John about their experience he was disturbed by Diotrophes's behavior but thrilled to hear how Gaius responded.

In verses three and four John writes:

“For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.”

And then comes our text---“***I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.***”

I want us to consider this morning four reasons why John can make such a claim but before we do, it is important be clear that **when John speaks of his children he is not speaking biologically, he is speaking spiritually.**

Throughout John's letters he often refers to the people he is writing to as his children and even his “little children.” These are not his physical offspring and these are not necessarily young children. These are his spiritual children, those who have come to faith through his preaching and teaching ministry. And Gaius is one of them.

So it is important to say at the outset that this extreme joy that John has and the joy that I am eager for us to experience more and more is not limited to those in this room who have physical offspring nor to those who are investing in children. This extreme joy comes when we hear or observe that anyone, young or old, related or not is walking in the truth.

I hasten to say, however, that what we learn from this text certainly applies to our physical offspring and to the children growing up among us at College Park and even to children yet to be born. My earnest desire is that we as a congregation will pursue the joy of witnessing these children embracing the truth and walking in it.

May God grant that we be spiritually fertile fruitful and multiplying for our joy and for the joy of our spiritual children especially those among the next generations, even those who are yet to be born.

How is it then, that John can make such an extreme claim that he has no greater joy than to hear that his children are walking in the truth –here are four reasons why I believe John was rejoicing.

1. **Because John treasured the truth himself.** John had devoted his life to proclaiming the truth and nothing gave him more joy, than seeing people believe and embrace that truth and turn around and start walking in the truth.

He makes a similar statement in his second letter, chapter 1, verse 4

"I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth"

In fact he begins his second letter referring to himself as

"The elder" to the church which he refers to as "the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:"

The reason John experienced extreme joy when he learned that Gaius was walking in the truth is because he treasured the truth himself. We cannot know this extreme joy unless we treasure the truth ourselves.

2. **John was rejoicing because he feared God** and he knew what was at stake if his children did not follow in the truth.

As we will see in a few minutes, John understood that everybody is going one way or the other. We are either walking in the truth or we are not.

If John's children were not walking in the light of truth they were sliding down in the darkness of unbelief. If they were not rising to everlasting joy they were sinking into everlasting sorrow. John knew where the road of unbelief ended and he trembled at the thought of those he loved like his own children giving in to that way.

John Angell James was a 19th Century pastor in England for 50 years said this in a book he wrote to his children and the children of his church:

But how it would embitter our last moments, and plant our dying pillow with thorns, to leave you on earth in an unconverted state; following us to the grave, but not to heaven. Or should you be called to die before us, how could we sustain the dreadful

thought...that the very next moment after you had passed beyond our kind attentions, you would be received to the torments which know neither end nor mitigation? And when you had departed under such circumstances, what could heal our wounds or dry our tears." (p.38)

"What then, my children, are all worldly acquirements and possessions without piety?...Original genius, a vigorous understanding, a well-stored mind, and all this adorned by the most amiable temper and most insinuating address, will neither comfort under trials of life nor save their lovely possessor from the worm that never dies and the fire that is never quenched. O! no: they may qualify for earth but not qualify for heaven."¹

God forbid that our children qualify for earth but not qualify for heaven.

3. **He rejoiced because he was seeing the fruit of his labor.**

For the believer who loves the truth there is joy whenever we see any child of God walking in the truth whether we know them or not.

When we hear people giving testimony to their faith.

When we hear testimonies like we heard this morning of how God brought people out of darkness and into the light we rejoice and we clap and we want to "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow."

And when God uses us to bring a person to faith in Christ we rejoice even more;

-when God uses us to show them the way;

-when we pour out our heart and soul in prayer for them and have labored and perhaps given our whole lives to show them how to walk in the Truth ---and they walk!-

our hearts leap with joy and I dare say you rejoice with John in saying

I have no greater joy than that!

4. **John was rejoicing because Gaius was walking in the truth**

—not just standing in it. There would be no joy if all Gaius did was give lip service to the truth.

Certainly John was happy that Gaius knew the truth—it is important to know, it is essential that they know—and we must give ourselves to imparting the truth to our children.

But knowing and understanding the truth is of little use unless we are walking in it.

In his first letter 1 John 1: 5-6 John wrote these words

*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we **say** we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (which is another way of saying we do not walk in the truth).*

There are many people riding down the down escalator who have grown up in Christian homes and have heard the truth all their lives. They will even tell you as John says "they have fellowship

¹ James, John Angell, The Christian Father's Present to His Children Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993(p.41)

with Christ”—they will say they know Jesus and are following him but they have never changed directions, they are still coasting their way to destruction.

We want our children to know the truth but we must not be content until we see them walking in the truth.

God forbid that our children end up being Romans 1:21 people, of whom Paul says

“...although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

Or Isaiah 29:13 people of whom the Lord says :

“... draw near with their mouth and honor me while their hearts are far from me...”

Instead, may they be 3 John 1:4 people who are walking in the truth to our great joy!

So How do we pursue this great joy at College Park?

We must maintain at least **three priorities** if we are going to experience this extreme joy with regard to our own children

#1. We must be serious about imparting truth to our kids

Ten years ago George Barna wrote a book based on what is probably the most extensive research that has been done on children and faith. *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children should be your church's #1 Priority.*²

He challenges the church and parents to consciously raise children with a biblical worldview—which to me is the same as saying that we must consciously raise our children to walk in the truth.

He identifies four cornerstones that are required in order to facilitate this kind of outcome.

#1 The Bible established and understood as the only trustworthy source of wisdom and truth.

#2 A commanding knowledge of biblical content.

#3 Identification of Organizing Principles

It will be helpful to quote Barna himself here:

“Our research finds that most churches teach good biblical content but fail to tie it together into a logical, comprehensive framework that makes sense and provides practical counsel---we must assist young people in connecting the dots of God's principles so that they draw a striking picture of truth and purpose without getting lost down the rabbit trails of spiritual intrigue.”

In other words we have to not only give them the content of the truth, we have to show them how to walk in it.

#4 A burning desire to obey God

Without this burning desire our children may know the truth but they will not walk in it.

² Barna, George, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003*

Ultimately, the spirit of God must burn that desire in their hearts but we don't sit back passively waiting for that to happen.

⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ And then you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
Deuteronomy 6:5-9

- If we want our children to passionately follow Jesus, we as their parents and teachers and people who care about the outcome of their faith must first be passionately following Christ.
- It can't just be in our heads.
- We can't just cloth ourselves in a religious veneer on Sunday morning and forget about it the rest of the week. We must burn with a passion for truth

If our children are going to walk in the truth they must walk with people who walking in the truth--- which brings us to our next priority:

Priority #2 Strategic Support, Encouragement and Equipping of Parents

The people who have the most access, the best opportunity, and the greatest potential influence, not to mention the biblical responsibility for helping children walk in the truth are their parents. My fear, parents, is that we run with our children in 20 different directions cramming their lives with everything that this dark world has to offer them, everything that this world says they must have (not all bad but often so consuming that there is little time or opportunity left to impart the truth and walk in it with them). We must be careful not to trade the greater things for lesser things.

- What will it profit a child to be an accomplished pianist but spend his life as a fool?
- What will benefit a child to have all the friends in the world—even good Christian friends—but have no friend in Jesus on Judgment day?
- What good will it do for a child to marry well but never sit at the marriage feast of the lamb?
- What will it benefit a child who makes it to the national championship on his way to destruction?
- What will it profit a child to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

Imparting truth to our children is essential—we pray that it takes precedence over everything else you could be doing at home.

It does take precedence over everything else we do in Next Generations Ministry at College Park. We cannot back away from this. We do not do it perfectly and we will keep working to do it better. We will pursue the vision of your children (our children) walking in the truth with all our might.

We will labor to keep people in front of your kids who are walking in the truth and burn with delight in the Lord and who will love them relentlessly and devote themselves to imparting the truth. But our couple hours a week is no substitute for the passionate and rigorous parental pursuit of this vision and this unsurpassable joy! Therefore we will labor to encourage and support and challenge and develop resources for parents in this parental role.

In his study, Barna asked the churches how they measured success in their ministry to children and youth. Most, he said, *"pointed to: growing numbers of students enrolled, consistent attendance, completion of curriculum in the allotted time, parental satisfaction, minimal discipline problems, etc."*

The most effective churches had very different indicators of success.

These churches were experiencing the widespread involvement of parents in the spiritual development of children. The effort to nurture children is deemed deficient if it is not led by the parents themselves in close partnership with the church.

A second indicator of success is that these churches were strategically equipping parents to help children develop spiritually.

Third, these churches were witnessing elements of transformation in children's lives—not the mere recitation of facts but lifestyle transitions that suggest a deeper renovation of the heart and spirit. (pp. 102)

Priority #3 Prayer

Of the churches that Barna studied that had effective ministries by these standards Barna—*"In my judgment, the prayer investment made by the effective churches may be the single most important venture of their ministries. I found that the most productive children's ministries have five streams of prayer offered to God:*

- 1. The first of those is from teachers of the youngster. Teachers are encouraged to pray for each student on a regular basis.*
- 2. teachers pray as a team, usually on a weekly basis, along with other staff and church leaders associated with the ministry to children.*
- 3. The involvement of intercessors who volunteer to faithfully pray for the teachers and students. (I don't think we have this)*
- 4. Because the ministry to children is highly valued in these churches it is not surprising to find that the entire congregation frequently prays for that ministry. (We do this and we could do more)*
- 5. The fifth avenue of prayer emanates from the parents. Some of these churches organize prayer times for parents, link parents with prayer partners etc.*

Randy and Kathi Westland have been dear friends of ours for 30 years in Minnesota . Several years ago Kathi shared a story that she had learned at a family reunion about her great uncle Gus who was a man of prayer who prayed earnestly for his children. Gus's usual place of prayer was at the foot of his four-poster bed and when knelt to pray he would grab ahold of the post and over time, he had worn the finish off the bedpost in the place where he put his hand.

For years, since hearing that story I have used the example of Kathi Westlund's Great Uncle Gus to inspire parents and especially dads to wear the finish off our bedposts praying for the next generations

Earlier this year as we were anticipating making the move to Indiana and College Park church we were talking with the Westlunds . We put two and two together and discovered that until his death a few years ago, Kathi's Great Uncle Gus Lambrides not only lived in Indianapolis, but was an active member of the church I was being called to.

The legacy of his man who had been such an example and inspiration in my life has marked the church I have the privilege of serving today we rejoice with him in the fruit of those prayers as we witness his daughter Elaine Erickson walking in the truth and her children after her.

If you would like to read more about this legacy go to yourchurch.com where we have reposted on our blog an article that Elaine wrote about her dad.

May Gus's number increase at College Park and may his example inspire us to wear the finish off our bedposts praying earnestly for the joy of the next generations.

A Word to those who carry a "living cross"

I am very conscious of those of you who are grieving beyond description as I go on and on about the great joy when children walk in the truth.

I am painfully aware that just as there is great joy when we hear of our children walking in the truth, there is great sorrow—perhaps no greater sorrow when our children forsake the truth and walk in darkness.

Charles Spurgeon:

"No cross is so heavy to carry as a living cross. Next to a woman who is bound to an ungodly husband or a man who is unequally yoked with a graceless wife, I pity the father whose children are not walking in the truth, who yet is himself an earnest Christian. Must it always be so, that the father shall go to the house of God and his son to the alehouse? Shall the father sing the songs of Zion, and the son and daughter pour forth the ballads of Belial? Must we come to the communion table alone, and our children be separated from us? Must we go on the road to holiness and the way of peace, and behold our dearest ones traveling with the multitude the broad way, despising what we prize, rebelling against Him who we adore? God grant it may not be so..."³

But I am certain it is so for many.

I want to give a word to those of you who are carrying this living cross. Those of you who with Paul in Romans 9 say "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen (my children) according to the flesh."

In fact in a few minutes I am going to invite those of you in this room who are carrying such a cross to stand and let a few who are around you stand with you while pray for you and for the children you are trembling for.

But first, I want to give you a word of hope--

1. Beware of the Accuser of the Brethren (Rev. 12:10)

Your ancient foe who is a liar and a murderer from the beginning. Every time I hold up a banner for parents and challenge them to be vigilant and faithful and take their calling seriously, there are those who feel indicted, who feel that they must have blown it and condemn themselves. Do not believe the lies. You are not being punished. Many of you have been faithful parents and should not listen to the accuser. Perhaps you are aware of ways that you have sinned against your children. If you have, then confess your sin, and look to the cross for forgiveness and trust the living God who even takes our sin and uses it for good. If you missed opportunities or your weakness as a parent has been exposed, or as you look back there are things you would have done differently, then boast with Paul in your weakness and trust the one whose power is made perfect in weakness. Your imperfections as

³ Spurgeon's Sermons on Family and Home Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995 pp. 28

a parent cannot restrain the mighty hand of God who will accomplish his glorious purposes that have been established for you and your children before the foundation of the world.

2. **"Surrender all worldly claim upon their lives in the hope that they will belong wholly to the Lord forever"**

When Sally and I dedicated our daughters to the Lord one of the promises we made was that we would *"surrender all worldly claim upon their lives in hope that they would belong wholly to God forever."*

When we as parents receive our children as gifts of God, our children still belong to God. He retains the title. He reserves sovereign rights to lead our children where he will and work in them everything that is pleasing in his sight. When we surrender any claim we have on our children to God, we are trusting him to call them to himself, in his way and on his timetable, no matter how frightened and discouraged and hopeless and angry we may feel.

Would it make a difference to you who are carrying this "living cross" if you knew that the foolishness and rebellion that is so disturbing was the means God would use to bring them to a saving encounter with the living Christ?

We all want for our children to grow up in Christian homes, hear the truth, embrace it and to begin walking in it early in life.

But we have heard far too many testimonies to know that this is not always God's way of bringing children of Christian parents to faith.

We must trust him and yield our hearts to his way and his purpose for our children.

3. **Remember it ain't over till it's over.**

One of my "spiritual children" was Ellen Olson who died at 96 years old. Ellen lived in darkness for 87 years before coming to Christ in a dramatic and life changing way. I have often wondered if her mom, a religious woman, had prayed and shed tears over her godless daughter. If she did, she never saw the fruit of her prayers and tears.

4. **Bow before the sovereign hand of God.**

If the "King's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD who turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1) so also is the heart of your child. Nothing is outside the power of God. Nothing can thwart his purposes even the heart of the most rebellious child. Trust the goodness of God. Ultimately (and dreadfully) we must acknowledge and put our hand over our mouths in humble submission to our God who has chosen some to be "vessels of wrath" (Romans 9:22)—The thought of our children perishing in unbelief is a horrible thought and leaves us wondering how we could have joy in heaven knowing that our children are lost forever.

John Piper who was my pastor for 33 years and who spent eight years preaching through Romans, told us back in November of 2002 in his message on Romans 9: 1-5:

"And if anyone should raise the legitimate question: Will we then be sad throughout eternity because of those who are accursed and cut off from Christ in hell? Will heaven be a place of eternal grief? – the answer is no. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes . . . neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore" (Rev. 21:4). Why? Jonathan Edwards put it like this: "With respect to any affection that the godly have had to the finally reprobate, the love of God will wholly swallow it up. And cause it wholly to cease". Those who die in their sinful rebellion – we say it with tears now – will not have the power to hold heaven hostage with their own misery. Here we groan and weep. There we are consumed with the glory of Christ.'"⁴

I believe College Park is a safe place to grieve for wayward children and I pray that we always will be.

And if you are among those who are grieving in this way today, I would invite you to stand now while I pray for you and your children. And as an expression of our desire for College Park to be a place where you find grace and support and not indictment, I would us to extend our hands toward these people as I pray.

Father in heaven,

I want to begin by thanking you for bringing these parents to faith. Thank for all that you did to turn their hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

Thank for opening their eyes to see the beauty of Christ and the joy that they had turned their backs on

Thank you for giving them the grace and power to turn away from the gravitational pull of their own hearts and to follow you.

And I stand with these parents in humble submission to your will and your way and your timetable and we ask that you would grant to them the courage and the faith to believe that their children will be saved. Grant death to these children, that is, death to the sin nature that they have inherited as sons and daughters of Adam and raise them up to new life in Christ Jesus.

In Jesus name we ask that you lead them out of darkness --into your glorious light. We ask that you rescue them from the kingdom of Satan and make them citizens of your unshakeable kingdom. Let them be poor in this world if they must but make them rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which you have promised all who love you.

All we want them to have is you because you are infinitely more than what they need. Destroy all rivals to your throne in their lives. Take away every god in their lives except God Almighty. Take away their affections for every treasure but the treasure of Jesus Christ their Savior. Neutralize the power of every spirit except the power of your Holy Spirit working righteousness and peace within them. Bring every thought, every desire, every dream, every word, and every act under your divine control. Overcome the deadly gravitational pull of their sin and turn them around that they might live and rest their hope in you.

May not one of these children be lost and may these parents and this church one day soon know the extreme joy when they hear that these children are walking in the truth,

Make it so, dear Jesus, for glory and for our everlasting joy, Amen.

⁴ John Piper--, Romans 9:1-5, November 10, 2002

As you leave this morning you will see our next generations staff at a table display in the Atrium with opportunities for people to invest in this vision. We have needs for people to serve in various areas of our ministry. Our needs are going to be even greater as we pursue a new campus in Fishers.

We pray those needs will be met but we don't want people to merely respond to our needs for more workers. We want spiritual parents to join with us in pursuing the joy of the next generations together. We want to give people the opportunity to show children the way and to see them walking in the truth.

In pursuing this aim we are pursuing our extreme joy! Nothing will make us happier---nothing will give us more joy than when we see the next generation at College Park walking in the truth.

I would like to conclude by sharing a portion of an essay by John William Smith that captures the struggle; the joy and the heart of those who labor to see their children walking in the truth. The essay is entitled *Run Tami Run*.⁵

In this essay, John explains that he had been invited by a friend in Dallas to attend the Texas Regional Cross-Country Races at Mae Simmons Park. As he described this experience he said:

I had no child running, and so I often found myself watching those who did. Their faces were intent, their eyes always picking out the only runner they were interested in; and often, when the runners were far away and could not hear their shouts of encouragement, still their lips would move, mouthing the precious, familiar names - and one other word. Sometimes they would say the names softly, if for no ears but their own, yet audibly -just because they loved to hear the sound.

"Run Jimmy" they whispered urgently
Run, Tracy. Run."

Then Smith describes an unforgettable incident that occurred as the class 5 A girls race was coming to a close.

I watched a forty-plus-year-old mother - wearing patent leather shoes and a skirt and carrying a purse - run the last hundred yards beside her daughter. She saw no other runners. As she ran awkwardly, stumbling - her long dark hair coming undone and streaming out behind her - giving no thought to the spectacle she made - she cried, "Run, Tami, run! Run, Tami, run!" There were hundreds of people crowding in, shouting and screaming, but this mother was determined to be heard. "Run, Tami, run! Run, Tami, run," she pleaded. The girl had no chance to win, and the voice of her mother, whose heart was bursting with exertion and emotion, was not urging her to win.

She was urging her to finish.

The girl was in trouble. Her muscles were cramping; her breath came in ragged gasps; her stride was broken she was in the last stages of weariness- just before collapse. But when she heard her mother's voice, a marvelous transformation took place. She straightened, she found her balance, her bearing, her rhythm - and she finished. She crossed the finish line, turned, and collapsed into the arms of her mother. They fell down together on the grass, and they cried, and then they laughed. They were having the best time together, like there was no one else in the world but them. "God," I thought, "that is beautiful. Thank you for letting me see that."

⁵ John William Smith, *My Mother Played the Piano*, pp171-173, Howard Pub. Co, West Monroe, LA, 1997

As I drove away from Mae Simmons Park, I couldn't get it off my mind. A whole morning, of outstanding performances had merged into a single happening. I thought of my own children and of a race they are running - a different and far more important race. A race that requires even greater stamina, courage, and character. I am a spectator in that race also. I have helped them train; I have pleaded - instructed - threatened - punished - prayed - praised - laughed - and cried. I have even tried to familiarize them with the course. But now the gun is up and their race has begun, and I am a spectator. My heart is bursting -

I see no other runners.

Sometimes their course takes them far from me, and yet I whisper, "Run, children, run." They do not hear, but there is One who does. Occasionally, they grow weary, cause the race is long and demands such sacrifice. They witness hypocrisy, and there are many voices that call to them to quit this foolish race, telling them they cannot possibly win. They lose sight of their goal, and they falter and stumble - and I cry,

"Run, children, run - O God - please run.

And then they come to the last hundred yards - how I long to be there, to run beside them, "Run, Lincoln; run, Debbie; run, Brendan; run, Kristen." What if I am gone and there is no one to whisper, to shout "Run" in their ears. What if Satan convinces them that they are not going to win? What if his great lie - that you must beat the others - causes them to allow defeat to settle over them? What if they lose sight of the great truth - that in this race, it is finishing that is the victory. That is why our Lord Jesus said at the last,

"It is finished."

And that is why the great apostle Paul said,

"I have finished my course."

Oh God, hear my prayer. If they cannot hear my voice, if I must watch from beyond this arena - dear Lord Jesus, as you have run beside me so often please run beside them and strengthen their knees that they might finish. And dear God, when they cross that eternal finish line may I be there to embrace them and welcome them home. May we cry and laugh and spend eternity praising the grace by which we were given the victory.

"Run, Tami - run.

There is no greater joy than to hear and to see that our children are walking in the truth!

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